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ABSTRACT

At the higher education level, some educators saw individualization of the college curriculum as a means for personal development and a method for empowering the students and the faculty. Notions of adult education appeared to reinforce the strong movement to individualize the college curriculum. The development of contract learning pulled together the differing ideologies and concerns of educating adults. New York's Empire State College, an entirely contract-based institution, and other such colleges faced the following problems in implementing contract-based programs: programs were often highly conventional and similar to traditional ones and programs were highly specialized with little breadth. Interrelated reasons for these seemingly antithetical situations were that many adults attend college simply for the credentials, these students do not perceive themselves as voluntary learners, students may want to dictate what they will learn, and many students are ill-prepared academically or not well-directed. Faculty issues and the general process orientation of the individualized approach compounded these problems. Adults who sought flexibility of access rather than content reshaped the original purposes of programs such as Empire State. The result of assuming too much about the learner was programs that did not empower students but left them feeling shortchanged or manipulated. (YLB)

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Individualized Higher Education and Empowerment: The Potential and the Pitfalls

Paper presented at the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education, October, 1987

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It has become axiomatic among educators of all types that individualizing education is the best approach for learners of all ages. As one writer articulated the faith somewhat hyperbolically, "Complete individualization is a goal for educators much as democracy is a goal for Americans or Christianity a goal for Christians." (Musgrave, 1975, p.x) Despite varying degrees of implementation, educators still insist that individualization is a high priority that immeasurably improves that quality of an educational experience for child and adult alike.

The near universal acceptance of the goal of individualization masks the many different formats and ideologies that individualization has come to embody. For some, particularly educators of children individualization has come to mean technique - that is the adaptation of the basic curriculum to the learning style, background, and interest of the individual student. In particular it often means some kind of programmed instruction where students may proceed at their own pace. The acceptance of this approach was the result of the convergence of several issues in the late 1960's. The first was the improvement of technology, particularly the advent of the computer, which allowed for the introduction of programmed instruction. In addition, some learning theorists were closely examining the nature of learning and were concluding that learning was an entirely individual act, taking place entirely within the learner. Thus, while social interaction could be important in testing a student's has learning the key to the act of learning was the organization of the material for the individual student (Gagne, 1975). Thirdly, faced with the rising criticism of the irrelevance of the educational system, educators were reassessing the structure of the curriculum and of educational institutions. Several writers such as Bloom, McKeachie, and Minter called for greater attention to the individual needs

of the student as a remedy for these problems (Knowles, 1986). Finally, individualization was seen as a way of dealing with the problems of the underprepared student. It was envisioned as a way of bringing these students up to grade-level quickly through a knowledge of the individual student and how he or she learned best (Committee for Economic Development, 1975).

All of these approaches were considered equally valid for children and for adults, at all levels of schooling. One the post-secondary level, other concerns were added to the above. Faced with devastating critiques of the college curriculum and of the authoritarian nature of the university bureaucracy, many educators began to consider how the entire structure of a college education could be individualized. In addition to all of the above reasons, for some educators, individualization was seen as a way of transferring power from a bureaucratic institution to the students and faculty. This involved a rethinking of traditional disciplinary distinctions and of the very structure of knowledge as presently conceived. (Feeney and Riley, 1975). Thus individualizing the college curriculum would help individual students construct meaning from the material and make their own connections between academic studies and reality. In this process, a college education would become a means for individual, personal development, deeply personal intellectual journey and a method for empowering the students and the faculty.

These issues surfaced at the same time that the colleges and universities saw a tremendous increase in the number of adults. Notions of adult education appeared to re-enforce an already strong movement to individualize the college curriculum. Adults were considered to be mature and self-directed. With limited time, they needed a college curriculum that would

enable them to grow and learn on their own terms. They would be capable of building on their past experiences and taking control of their studies. The development of contract study pulled together all of these differing ideologies and concerns. There are three types of contract learning: contracting for grades; contracting for one component of study within a traditional program (independent study); and contracting for a complete educational experience or program (Berte, 1975). While all three have been deemed appropriate for adult students, only the latter two allow for the flexibility that would empower students and give them control over the curriculum. This aspect of the contract approach allows students to participate in the development, structuring, and evaluation of the learning activity.

Empire State College, a branch of the State University of New York (SUNY), is entirely contract-based. Students establish their own programs of study in conjunction with a faculty mentor and then write contracts for each individual component. They may choose to take a traditional course at a traditional college or to study with tutor who will help them write an individualized learning contract and will meet with them on a regular basis. Tutors may be regular faculty members or experts from the community. Other approaches to study include in-service training courses; volunteer or field experiences; or even travel if an academic component can be identified. In addition, students may have their prior learning evaluated for up to 96 credits (that is three-quarters of their degree).

Ideally, the final degree program represents the student's knowledge before entry into Empire State College as indicated in transfer credits and prior learning evaluations as well as current studies. The program should indicate planning; development and advancement in subject-matter; breadth of

study (although there are no requirements); and some combination of the practical (where appropriate) and the theoretical. In theory, it would seem that such a program would be the epitome of the "andragogic" approach.

Yet Empire State and other such colleges have experienced many problems in the implementation of such programs. These can be summarized as: 1. Programs are often highly conventional and not really very different from what one would see in a traditional student transcript (Feeney and Riley, 1975); and conversely 2. Programs are highly specialized with little breadth.

There are several interrelated reasons for these seemingly antithetical situations. In order to understand the problem we need to examine the students in these programs, the faculty, and the process of learning. In the first place, many students, particularly adults attend college simply for credentials. They want the credential to look as traditional as possible. If they are seeking a degree in management they want to make sure that their degree resembles other management degrees so that it will achieve for them what they want.

In the second place, these students do not usually perceive themselves as voluntary learners. Although they are in fact usually making some kind of choice about trying to advance (it is not infrequently the case that students are not even making this choice since they face the situation of losing their present positions if they do not receive a bachelor's degree) they do not take any responsibility for the decision to return to school and in fact view it as a burden. This is not to say that they are unwilling to learn new things related to their work, but they really have no interest in expanding themselves in other ways - at least at this point in their lives. Typically, students in business will be evaluated for everything they know

in this area. They will then take the "required" core business "courses" such as economics, principles of management, etc. They will also probably want to study some areas of their specialty in greater depth. Since most students come to Empire with some previous college transfer credits, this will be their program. Perhaps they will have one or two non-business subjects at Empire, but probably no more.

Thirdly, students who may have an extremely well-developed sense of where they want to go and look at the college as a resource, often do not appreciate any sense of negotiation on the part of the faculty about what may constitute "appropriate" college-level learning. They go far beyond the initial anti-authoritarian thrust of the individualization movement to stress that only they have the power to say what is valid learning.

Finally, many students are either ill-prepared academically or not nearly as directed as the literature would lead one to believe. This, in addition to the above constraints, could lead to a totally dependent student who relies heavily on the adviser for information. This student may never take over his or her program.

These student problems are not insurmountable, but they are compounded by some faculty issues and by the general process-orientation of the individualized approach. As Feeney and Riley (1975) early pointed out, individualized education has the potential of moving power out of the hands of institutions and into individuals - both student and the faculty members. If faculty members are too wedded to their own disciplines and unwilling to investigate other approaches they really will not be able to take advantage of the possibilities the structure offers both to them and to the students.

In a contracting situation the faculty role is substantially different from that of the traditional academic. Beyond a wide-ranging (often impos-

sible) command of various aspects of their discipline, faculty members are expected to have well-developed counseling capabilities. The faculty-student relationship may become quite intense and individuals may find it difficult to play the many roles demanded. The mentor at once is acting as a representative of a particular discipline, the individual student and the institution itself. While these different roles do not necessarily represent divergent interests, they quite often do. Faculty members often find it impossible to maintain a negotiating stance in such situations. Ironically, they fall back on the authoritarian model which such learning was designed to undermine. They look either to traditional curricula or to some presumed outside model to justify a program instead of "forcing" the students to make the connections and defend their own programs. In addition, this dyadic relationship often, undercuts student independence. There are no other students with whom the individual may confer and unite. He or she is ultimately alone. For some students this can be an exhilarating experience. But for others it is totally intimidating. There is no possibility for observing other types of interactions and hearing opposing views - except those offered by the faculty member. The nurturing, student-centered advisor may end up encouraging a completely idiosyncratic program which has been developed in a vacuum.

The learning that takes place through this contract approach is process-oriented. It is based on the belief that people who have control over the content of their studies will learn more than those who do not and that it really does not matter what the particular content is. The history of the development of the college curriculum has been overwhelmingly concerned with this issue (Rudolph, 1975). The question remains of how to

reconcile individual student's needs for particular knowledge and the educator's interest in helping students learn how to learn.

Individualizing the college curriculum is part of a broader thrust that has affected education at all levels. In terms of adult education, in particular, it has made some cogent additions to the treatment of adults on some college campuses. It would seem however that the assumptions about empowerment and adult's preferred learning conditions are open to question. This approach, rather than being a panacea, seems to be appropriate for certain people under certain conditions. The problems have emerged as those adults seeking flexibility of access, but not necessarily content, have reshaped the original purposes of the programs such as Empire State. Too much has been assumed about the learner and the result has been programs that far from empowering the student often leave him or her feeling short-changed and manipulated.

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